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ABSTRACT

Composition instruction based on aims of discourse rather than on modes can help students understand the purpose and function behind their writing. Such an approach, developed by Caroline Eckhardt and David Stewart, offers four categories that cover most purposes for writing in academic or career settings: (1) to clarify what the subject is, (2) to substantiate a thesis about a subject, (3) to evaluate a subject, and (4) to recommend that something be done about a subject. There are several advantages to this approach. First, it is easier for students to understand and apply. Second, since the focus of the categories is on the aim or purpose of communicating with someone, the students get a clearer sense of what audience means and what a real writing situation demands. Third, each category builds on the one before it, providing further practice in each writing skill. Finally, the approach makes it easier for the composition instructor to bring in assignments that explicitly use materials from other disciplines, thus giving the students a wider variety of situations in which to practice their skills. Students who have been taught the aims approach seem more aware of the writing process. Because they have so many strategies open to them to develop their essays (instead of one prescribed mode), they are more attuned to their need to adjust writing to the purpose of their communication and to the needs of the audience who will read it. (HOD)

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THE AIMS APPROACH: MORE EFFECTIVE WRITING
FOR THE REAL WORLD

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Most of us who teach freshman composition hope that our students will leave our classrooms better able to write their essay exams, reports, and research papers in other college classes and maybe even their law briefs, government proposals, scientific reports, and marketing analyses when they graduate and embark on their careers. We continue to hope that our lessons "take," even after we get some of our former composition students in a sophomore literature or humanities class and discover that their essay exams are all but unreadable. And we bristle sometimes at the attitudes of our colleagues in other disciplines who seem to say that if English teachers were really doing a good job, they wouldn't see such drivel on exams and in papers.

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The problem of the transfer of learning from one course to another course or situation is quite complex. Many of us have long felt that we cannot "vaccinate" the students against the "disease" of bad writing in the course of one 15 week semester. We argue for increased writing requirements in other disciplines to reinforce the principles we have taught and to provide continued practice in the written expression of ideas. Some of

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us at Maryland, Texas, Penn State, and other institutions have inaugurated a Junior-Senior level writing course to emphasize the need for later practice and to take advantage of students' maturity and greater exposure to their majors. But other factors besides the amount of practice are at work as well. We may be able to take comfort (but certainly not pleasure) in knowing that students faced with more intellectually challenging material or a subject for which they are not as well-prepared will make more errors and write more illogically than they did writing personal experience papers in first semester composition.¹ The fact that writing and learning are inextricably bound explains why someone who is otherwise a good writer may write bad chemistry reports or a poor economics essay exam.

Another problem related to this one concerns the nature of today's college students. Randall Freisinger notes that "Since the early 1970's, evidence has been accumulating which suggests that up to fifty percent of the adolescent population in the country fail to make the transition from the concrete operations state to formal operations by the time they have reached . . . college age."² Marilyn Sternglass defines formal operations according to Piaget as "thinking about thoughts rather than things that exist" and says that students are not asked to think abstractly often enough.³

What then can English instructors do to help their students write better outside the English classroom, in the "real world," so to speak? Since the factors affecting transfer of learning are various and complex, no "quick fix" is possible and programs which are most effective embrace more writing requirements in all disciplines, tutoring in learning centers to enhance mastery of subject matter and help in the written expression of ideas. But I would like to suggest that organizing our composition teaching in a different way may also help our students transfer their writing skills to new writing situations.

Traditionally, many composition courses have been arranged according to the modes of discourse which can be traced back to the influence of Alexander Bain and others.⁴ This familiar approach classifies discourse into description, narration, exposition, and argument with sub-classifications under exposition such as definition, comparison-contrast and the like. Most composition teachers are aware that there are few "pure examples" of essays written in one mode because writers mix modes, and sometimes we wonder how to justify classifying some of the model essays we teach. Is George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" "description," "narration," "argumentation" or all three? More importantly, we are uneasy that after practicing each mode in isolation from each other, our students may be unable to meet the challenge of new writing situations which may not be laid out for them in terms of modes. My own

survey of my colleagues shows that few instructors outside of English classrooms specify mode when writing an essay examination question. At the most, students may see the word "compare" which may or may not remind them of the comparison-contrast essay they wrote in freshman composition. Most of the time they are simply told to explain the importance of a psychological theory or to evaluate an idea in light of evidence in the text. Since cues can be very important factors in the transfer of learning, their absence can mean that students will not respond to the new situation the way they would have responded in their English class.

Recently, many scholars of rhetoric have also questioned our division of discourse into the various modes. James Britton found the categories useless for his analysis of British school children's writing (ages 11-18) saying: "It rapidly becomes apparent that many pieces of writing employ one mode to fulfill the functions of another (which) is not... a difficulty that is easily overcome."⁵ Mike Rose agrees with Britton that more than one mode may be used to fulfill a function and further questions their value: "Certainly they are not useful in literary criticism and most certainly not in history, biology, psychology etc. ...My suspicion is that they confuse students, force them to classify the unclassifiable and-major concern-narrow or muddle their vision of what

they can do when an instructor tells them to 'argue' or 'explain' an issue."⁶ Frank D'Angelo and James Kinneavy agree that the modes approach may not help our students learn to write as effectively as they might.⁷ What is needed is, as Richard Haswell argues, "a classification of discourse designed not for the specialist looking for ways to analyze writing but for the beginning writer looking for ways to produce writing."⁸ The problem then becomes to find discourse categories which will be more effective for the beginning writer.

Since many scholars have wished to fill the void left by their rejection of Bain's modes, several new schemes for classifying discourse have emerged. Perhaps the most well known of these are those presented by James Britton, James Kinneavy, and James Moffett. The common thread running through these new classifications is the emphasis on the purpose or aim of the discourse. The reason the person is writing, that is the function, purpose or aim the writer is trying to accomplish, is what is most important. Britton's and Kinneavy's categories are fairly similar consisting of Transactional (for Kinneavy split into Referential and Persuasive), Expressive, and Poetic (or Literary in Kinneavy's terms).⁹

Though the main categories are clear and easy to understand, both Britton's and Kinneavy's subdivisions of their categories are better suited to analyze

a piece of written prose than to help student writers get a sense of the purpose or aim they wish to accomplish. For example, in Britton's scheme Transactional prose is sub-classified into Record, Report, Generalized Narrative, Analogic-low level, Analogic, Analogic-tautalogic, Tautalogic.¹⁰ No one contemplating writing an assignment thinks of those distinctions. Rather the distinctions help the researcher fit one writer's piece of writing into the range of other writers' pieces of writing. Kinneavy's sub-categories are also confusing for the same reason. As Richard Haswell says, Kinneavy's system "bypasses the immediate needs of writing students. He classifies products of writing...to understand better their formal relationships. Students need to identify and comprehend the intentional acts of writers for incorporation into their own writing repertoire."¹¹

So we're back to asking, what classification scheme will help our students most in our classes and the real world? The most useful scheme and the one that I have found easiest to understand and present to my classes is one outlined by Caroline Eckhardt and David Stewart in "Toward a Functional Taxonomy of Composition (CCC, Dec. 1979). Based on James Moffett's idea of a hierarchy of abstraction in which writing assignments begin concretely and move to more abstract levels, Eckhardt and Stewart present four categories which cover most purposes

for writing in academic or career settings (therefore the type of writing students will do most often):

1. To clarify what the subject is (to define a word, explain a concept, to report evidence)
2. To substantiate a thesis about a subject (to demonstrate that a conclusion is valid)
3. To evaluate a subject (to judge it as good or bad with reference to certain standards)
4. To recommend that something be done about a subject (to persuade people to think or act differently about it)¹²

There are several advantages to such an approach. First, it is easier for students to understand and apply. If an anthropology professor asks students on an essay exam to "Explain what social scientists mean by 'rites of passage,' and illustrate rites of passage for a particular culture," students know they are to clarify, to give information to the reader. The students use the modes (in the previous case definition and example) to fulfill their purpose of giving information, but they are not confused by having practiced the modes only in isolation one from another. Also since the focus of the categories is on the aim or purpose of communicating with someone, the students get a clearer sense of what audience means and what a real writing situation demands.

A further advantage to this aims approach is that each category builds on the one before it, providing further practice in each writing skill. That is, in order to evaluate something one would have to clarify what it is and substantiate its qualities before judging its worth. This incremental organization may also challenge students to write at increasing levels of abstraction and help them to adjust to more cognitively difficult writing tasks. Students writing papers based on modes often seem to remain at the same level, writing "formula" papers and getting no feeling of progress. The aims approach, on the other hand, may help students transfer their writing skills from the English classroom to writing situations in other disciplines.

Finally, this approach makes it easier for the composition teacher to bring in assignments which explicitly use materials from other disciplines, thus giving the students a wider variety of situations in which to practice their skills. For example, students could clarify a word or term used in another class for someone who has not yet taken the course, or they could choose a chapter from a textbook to summarize, or read an article in a professional journal and explain its points. "Real world" articles in magazines and journals can be analyzed for their strategies and purposes much more easily using this approach because it is not artificially restricted to one mode.

I conducted a two year study of aims vs. modes instruction

at Penn State, using holistic evaluation of essays and two student evaluation forms. One of the evaluation forms was my own, and the second was the 1980 College Composition and Communication Committee on Evaluation form, which contains over fifty questions on various aspects of writing instruction.¹³ Though both the aims and modes classes improved their writing in statistically measurable ways, the class evaluations revealed the differences between aims and modes instruction. Students in the aims classes were far more positive (at the .01 level of confidence) that their instruction had helped them to write better in other classes. They also had significantly higher positive responses to the following questions:

This course helped me improve my ability -

17. to adjust my writing style according to the purpose of my writing
18. to adjust my writing style according to the needs of my readers
23. to state for myself questions about my problems in writing
5. to understand the purpose of the writing assignment
6. to understand how the assignment related to one another
7. to practice writing for other audiences

In the classroom the students in the aims group seemed more aware of the writing process. They were more attuned to their need

to adjust writing to the purpose of their communication and to the needs of the audience who will read it. They asked more questions about the purpose of a paper and the projected reader and seemed more deeply committed to satisfying a specific reader. Because they had so many strategies open to them to develop their essays (instead of one prescribed mode), they planned their organization to suit the purpose and audience. Overall, the aims group seemed far more involved in the writing process than did the modes group.

After conducting the study, I feel certain that composition instruction based on aims, rather than modes, is better suited to the needs of our students. It is more realistic, fosters real growth and progress, and encourages transfer of writing skills to writing outside the English classroom.

End Notes

¹Aviva Freedman and Ian Pringle, "Writing in the College Years: Some Indices of Growth," CCC, 31, No. 3 (October 1980), 321.

²Randall R. Preisinger, "Cross Disciplinary Workshops: Theory and Practice," CE, 42, No. 2 (October 1980), 163.

³Marilyn Sternglass, "Fostering Cognitive Growth in Writing," address at NCTE Convnetion, Boston, MA, November 21, 1981.

⁴Richard Haswell, "Tactics of Discourse: A Classification for Student Writers," CE, 43, No. 2 (Feb. 1981), 170.

⁵James Britton, et. al., The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18), (London: McMillan Education Ltd., 1975), p. 5.

⁶Mike Rose, "The Dismantling of Process in Composition Texts," CCC, 32 (Feb. 1981), 69.

⁷Frank D'Angelo, "Modes of Discourse," in Teaching Composition, Ten Bibliographic Essays, ed. Gary Tate (Fort Worth, Texas: TCU Press, 1976) p. 117, and James Kinneavy, A Theory of Discourse (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 48.

⁸Haswell, p. 170.

⁹Kinneavy, p. 61, and Britton, pp. 88-89, 94-95, 163.

¹⁰Britton, p. 163

¹¹Haswell, p. 170.

¹²Caroline Eckhardt and David Stewart, "Toward a Functional Taxonomy of Composition," CCC, 30 (Dec. 1979), 340.

¹³Richard Larson, et. al., "Evaluating Instruction in Writing: Approaches and Instruments," CCC, 33, No. 2 (May 1980), 226-229.